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Enhancing the Potential of Design Conferences

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KEY WORDS

Individual Differences, Contextualisation, Skills, Value, Opportunities.

ABSTRACT.

A study of six international design conferences was carried out in 2002, to review opportunities for improving inter and intra-disciplinary knowledge dissemination. A metacognitive perspective (Flavell, 1979) was adopted for the consideration of individual differences and their affect upon delivery and reception of information.

A participative observational method was used by the investigator, as a presenter and audience member at all six conferences. This investigation reviewed conference organisation, venue facilities, presentation format, delivery, and audience comments. The investigator's presentations were all delivered using the same format, which aimed to facilitate ease of contextualisation and retention of information.

It was concluded that there are a number of quality improvements that can be adopted in the short and medium-term, by organisers, presenters and audience members.

INTRODUCTION

This investigation was carried out in response to an open question from Rachel Cooper and Mike Press at the close of the 2001 European Academy of Design conference in Averio. The question was: 'Are there any suggestions for enhancing the value of the design conference?'

Although the EAD conference has been acknowledged for its part in this investigation, the conferences that were studied have not been identified. The intent of this investigation has been to maintain an objective and constructive approach, to communicate opportunities for positive change.

A large number of issues are involved in the preparation and running of a conference. This paper aims to address those issues which can be major influences upon the success of a conference. The proposed approach is intended to identify opportunities for increasing value throughout the conference process, from conception to reflection.

Conception begins with agreement by the organising committee of the theme(s), afterwhich focus turns to the objectives of value creation. A conference should be viewed as a vehicle for:

- Dissemination of new thinking.
- Dissemination of new knowledge.
- Generation and discussion of new ideas.

Communication skills are key to enabling the organisation and delivery of these objectives. A metacognitive approach (Flavell, 1979) to our awareness of influences upon the success of communication, would suggest opportunities for improvement. For example, an assessment of cognitive preferences among designers information assimilation, using a visual, auditory and kinaesthetic test (Gregorc, 1982), indicated that greatest preference is for visual information to enable effective comprehension. Following close behind is kinaesthetic information, the need to touch and handle the object to improve understanding. Auditory information certainly has its value, but is generally rated the least favoured channel of communication. With this in mind, we can understand why greater cognitive effort is required by an audience when presenters read through their papers, or read from text slides. Visuals, when used appropriately aid the contextualisation of the presenter's intended message. However, reading the recommendations in this paper will not make sufficient difference, because

practice is required to internalise these skills, increase motivation and make for more interesting conferences, with the following mission:

To enhance the value and progress of design research, by continuous improvement of communication competencies, and thereby enable greater understanding and sharing of theories and practices among the design community.

METHOD

A total of six international conferences were visited by the investigator as both presenter and audience member. The investigation was carried out opportunistically rather than by prior arrangement with conference committees. The intent was to avoid creating an awareness of this activity, and thus avoid the risk of influencing situations and responses. Questions were not asked in a proactive sense, though some questions were asked in response to audience member comments to elicit more thoughts.

The tentative conclusions were then written up and tabled with colleagues at the School of Design, Northumbria University, to gather an outsider perspective, before final recommendations were written up.

OBSERVATIONS

The quality and success of conferences is accepted to vary, but on closer analysis the reasons for variation become clearer, identifying opportunities for improvement.

Organisation

A conference requires a great deal of time and effort to organise and promote. One common problem in arranging conferences these days involves the preparation and proofing of a website. Failure to launch a fully tested and approved site can be a source of embarrassment, especially within the design community.

The design of the website will often run in parallel with the creation of its content, with release stages for some pages, because not all content can be made available at launch. An obvious example is that the programme of events will not exist till well after the 'call for papers'. The site needs to be operational by 'call for papers', with an agreed format and agreed constraints for what further information will follow. If major errors are identified after launch they will need correction, but temptations for '*can we just*' adjustments, must be resisted. However, they may be used as lessons for continuous improvement of future conferences. The best solution is to identify web designers with a good track record for conference sites, and clearly brief them, supplying them with:

- Completion deadline.
- Sponsor's and organiser's colour pallet constraints.
- Layout style preferences
- Typeface preferences
- Necessary images
- Necessary text
- Necessary downloads
- Necessary links
- Information release dates.
- Launch date.

A far bigger challenge than the web design, concerns refereeing. The norm for a conference is double-blind refereeing, with neither the author nor the referee being told who the other is. A questionnaire is used to ensure some parity of assessment, using the following sorts of questions to rate each paper:

- Is the paper relevant to this conference?
- Are there well-defined research questions?
- Were clear methods used competently?
- Are there clear findings or outcomes?

- Does the paper report original work?
- Does the title reflect accurately the paper's contents?
- Does the abstract reflect accurately the paper's contents?
- Are references accurate and complete?
- Is the standard of English acceptable?
- Are visual sources presented adequately?

Friedman (2002)

These are all excellent and pertinent questions. However, cracks may begin to show if, for example, a referee's own English is not acceptable, or a if the referee cannot remain impartial concerning the topic and becomes distracted with additional personal issues. The assessment process normally involves a number of referees to balance any subjective differences of opinion, but a paper's author will question the quality of refereeing if wildly conflicting reports are returned.

Though design research is growing as a profession, it would seem to be difficult to engage enough willing referees of the right calibre for certain conferences themes. We may be forced to accept such restrictions presently, but to improve quality for the future we need clear criteria for referee competency:

- Are they respected for their field of research?
 - Do they have a number of quality publications?
 - Are they fluent in the presentation language?
 - Has their refereeing proven consistent with their peers?

Themes and presentations

The choice of themes and how they are dealt with in the programme of events is a key determinant of a conference's success. In addition, the number of submissions to be accepted for presentation must be clear from the outset. It is difficult however, in a growing field of research, to restrict the presentation offers. It is however, a reality for making a conference a success.

Too many parallel sessions can prove a frustration. While those with focused areas of interest may be satisfied with a 'dissimilar themes' approach, design by its very nature is eclectic, making compromises for the majority inevitable. So, a limit of two to three parallel sessions would appear to work best. Depending on venue, an extended conference of three to four days would appear to work well also.

Day themes also work well, though it was observed that this approach encouraged a higher level of single day attendance, which influences the interaction dynamics of delegates, and the value gained.

Workshops are gaining in popularity at design conferences, providing hands-on, kinaesthetic experience not available during a standard presentation. The downside of workshops however, is that it takes far more practice to have control over the level and length of an interaction. To achieve all of a workshop's objectives and still keep to the timeframe takes more practice than rehearsing for the delivery of a presentation. A potential error in practice for workshops, is not to appreciate the importance of audience status. The differences in delivery requirements for students and delivery for peers may significantly influence the dynamics of perceived control. Subsequently, from an audience perspective, the delivery may appear to be poorly pitched, intellectually. The recommendation is to practice with the intended target audience and use feedback forms.

It may not be appreciated that keynote speakers can pose a major problem for the organisers. Not only do willing and able speakers have to be identified, of the right calibre, there is an expectation of these invited speakers that they will outshine other presenters. However, it is clear that a number of keynote speakers are just as prone to poor presentation skills and ill considered content as everyone else, which leads to disappointment. The point here is that with a view to continuous improvement, no one should consider themselves above the natural laws of communication.

Poster sessions and exhibits may not live up to audience expectations. This is likely due to a number of issues, including poor communication of concepts, ineffective stand layout and the social dynamics of attendance. A more effective balance needs to be struck between acquiring the interest of attendees, and level of detail

provided on the posters. It is a temptation for presenters to say everything about a project, rather than just highlights. However, when this approach is taken it can lead to a requirement on the attendee for more reading, which may lead to awkward dynamics if the presenter is present. There is a sense of impoliteness in the reading of substantial text if the presenter is there to answer questions. But there can be a confidence conflict in asking the presenter questions when all the text has not been read first. A catch-22 situation which often leads to attendees skip reading and moving on to the next stand if their interest is not captured quickly, losing potential opportunities for both parties.

It is the responsibility of the organisers to provide an effective stand layout, with good circulation space, good lighting, and efficient stewarding to address any problems that may arise. However, the physiological and social dynamics of poster presentation can be controlled by presenters adopting more effective concept-selling techniques, including:

- A presentation style that catches peripheral vision
- Informative visuals that stir further interest
- Bullet points that anticipate and address key questions concisely
- Typeface and point size that can be read from two metres away
- Contact details
- Making eye contact with attendees
- Maintaining a happy and alert facial expression
- Open, relaxed posture
- Reading and reacting to attendee's cues of interest level
- Confidence in answering questions clearly, from prior practice
- Identifying opportunities of shared interest

Venue facilities

Choice of appropriate venue can be quite key to the success of a conference but involves many considerations:

- Is the venue cost effective?
- Will the environment be distracting?
- Are there any political considerations?
- What cultural visits are possible?
- What level of IT support is available?
- Are there seasonal considerations?
- Are there security considerations?
- Will all dietary requirements be catered for?
- What is access and transport like?

When visiting a foreign country most delegates are quite willing, if not eager, to experience the local culture. This can however, mean expectations that there will be one or two cultural trips organised. These trips either have to be costed into the programme or charged as an optional extra, but if left to the delegates to arrange by themselves, unprompted opportunities will inevitably be missed by some. It is suggested that the choice of venue should fulfil a requirement to broaden cultural experience among the design community.

Presentation preparation and delivery

Presentation format is a key consideration for every presenter and a key influence upon every audience member's attention and comprehension. There are no standards for presentation, and it is not proposed that there should be. However, it is proposed that consideration should be afforded for audience needs:

- Reading provides insufficient stimulation and contextualisation.
- Content must be pitched correctly to the target audience.
- Use visuals to support and clarify context: 2D, 3D, animation or video.
- Keep text concise. Use bullet points where appropriate.
- Font sizes must be clearly legible at distance.
- Text must not blend into the visuals. Contrast is necessary.
- Colours and shades of text must be readable against the background.
- Keep slide content simple, avoid highly detailed charts and diagrams.

- Use key slides as time markers to keep presentation to time.
- Rehearse presentation, preferably with a pilot audience.
- Bring a back-up presentation format, e.g. OHP slides.
- Bring main presentation on a number of back-up media.

One of the biggest problems with delivery of presentations is that the approach is often supported on the back of habit. These habits are implicit and as such the individuals may not question the need in investing time in improving. However, increasing awareness of factors may help motivate these individuals towards improvement. Such factors to consider, would include:

- Inflection in voice maintains audience attention.
- Tone implies status as well as mood. Pitch correctly.
- Trailing off is a common problem. Maintain volume.
- Face the audience.
- Positive posture helps frame presentations positively.
- Eye contact communicates confidence and sincerity.

Nervousness

Nervousness in many respects is a horizontal issue, in that it can be a response to lowered confidence in the core concerns of venue, audience, preparation, practice and plan changes. Though some individuals are more prone to nervousness than others, there are steps that can be taken to reduce this emotional distraction:

- Intrinsic motivation. You should be presenting because you want to
- Self-confidence will improve with practice and positive reception
- Propositional framing is important for perceiving audience interest
- Audience questions are an opportunity for you to clarify
- Situational issues should be anticipated
- Avoid depending upon others
- Nervous habits can be a distraction to the audience, but are often unconscious. Have them identified by peers, and try to break them through practice.

Alertness

Environmental factors such as temperature, air quality, noise, light level and comfort of furnishings, can all influence the level of presenter and audience alertness. While it is the responsibility of the organisers to provide an optimum environment, awareness of such issues provides the opportunity to request changes to be made.

Time factors are an obvious influence, whether presentations are after lunch, in the evening, or just too soon after a long haul flight. Try to arrive at distant destinations with sufficient time to at least make a partial adjustment. Adjust environmental conditions to heighten alertness during difficult periods.

Many people do not realise how important their diet can be to level of alertness. What is eaten, at what time of day and in what order, can influence the body's arousal levels. Judith Wurtman, (1986), has made recommendations for eating while at conferences, for the benefit of organisers and delegates:

- Less is more.
- Keep it low in fat.
- Start meals with protein.
- Plan to serve proteins and/or high-fibre carbohydrates at breaks.
- Make alcohol hard to come by.
- Have caffeinated and noncaffeinated beverages available at meals and breaks.

(Wurtman, 1986)

Presentation and delivery is key to maintaining audience attention, but beyond those factors already covered, it is recommended that presenters try to personalise their mode of delivery, to involve every audience member. This may be achieved by presenters requesting that the audience consider the merit of presentation content in terms of their own professions and circumstances.

Comments.

It was observed that people like to commend presenters when a presentation goes well, and we should be encouraged to do so, to reinforce good practice. It was also noted however, that people talk in confidence with one another where disapproval is felt, unless tensions rise with repeated frustrations at which time comments are made openly to convey general attitudes. The recommendation here is that if a negative observation is voiced by an audience member of the presenter or of another audience member, then it might best be considered as more than a single persons viewpoint, and certainly not dismissed as such.

The most useful form of feedback is often the comments and discussions that are received and developed after a presentation. It is recommended that regardless of position taken on a theory, approach or conclusions, we should all look to share one another's perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Like the gathering of clans, conferences are a natural part of human culture. The wish to share and learn is realised through our communication skills, but through our increasing knowledge of cognitive psychology it is becoming clear that we have a range of cognitive styles to cater for in our communications.

In conclusion of this investigation it is proposed that in order to make more of our conferences we need to become more aware of personal and organisational influences upon communication, especially within our design community. It is hoped that the recommendations within this paper can go some way towards developing that awareness, but there seems to be no more salient point than our need for clarity and the practice of intent.

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His field of research is the 'Psychology of Innovation', which encompasses a number of study areas within psychology, design and business. International interest in this field has been such that he has set up 'POINT', a network that seeks to encourage discussion, news and knowledge transfer between all interested members.

His focus within this field is individual differences and influences. The aim is to investigate and develop the intent to create change, through opportunity identification, communication, problem solving, and decision-making skills. The objective being to enable people to 'understand how they understand', as a metacognitive approach to self-developmental behaviour.