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# Long Tail Insights

There is growing evidence that many of the important innovations, significant discoveries and positive shifts in social practice and reform we benefit from today have arisen as a direct result of discussions, ideas and relationships initiated at conferences.

Life-saving medical breakthroughs, applications for new technologies and key strategies to guide our social development are increasingly linked to concepts and connections forged in conference environments, and those at the forefront of our quest to unlock the secrets of our universe believe conferences are a unique and vitally important tool which significantly enhances knowledge sharing and the generation of new ideas.

The idea for this book arose from three areas: our personal observations and experience of conferences, findings from our previous research, and our curiosity as researchers. What we have found is a collection of stories that lingers with us because of its ability to inspire. But more than this, we hope that readers will relate to the experiences shared, the business events industry will learn from these accounts and improve practices, and academics will ask their own questions and use this collection of stories to guide teaching activities and student learning. Thus, we hope that diverse readers will draw on the stories and use them in ways that meet their particular needs.

As we explained in the Introduction, we wanted to gain insights into the long tail of conferences and how moments of serendipity and innovation are sparked at such events. Human behaviour is complex, so it is only through stories such as these that we are able to find some clarity around how benefits can arise both during the conference and many years later.

This final chapter presents reflections at multiple levels – for students, researchers and practitioners looking to advance their knowledge and understanding of this industry sector, as well as providing a convenient summary.

Six themes have been drawn from these stories: creating networks, collaborations, partnerships and support; discussion, debate, stimulation, ideas and innovation; attracting funding, trade and investment; influencing public perceptions and policy and driving social change; personal growth,

knowledge and learning; and lessons for industry. In distilling the themes, the reader may be stimulated to add their own perspectives, to elucidate their own insights, and to consider research that is required in the future. These themes have highlighted the complexity of conferences, which has led us to consider what a conference business model may look like given our new understanding.

This chapter concludes by suggesting areas for further research.

## Creating Networks, Collaborations, Partnerships And Support

One of the strongest themes to arise from the stories is that a conference is an avenue for fostering networks – whether established or new. Networks were wide ranging and included: peer colleagues and researchers; clinicians; local enterprises; government agencies; various community groups and representatives; universities; non-profit associations; research funding agencies; consultants; suppliers; accreditation bodies; media; and customers.

Networks, collaborations, partnerships and support arose in a number of ways. For Dr Pia Winberg, these networks were interdisciplinary. She was able to connect with economists, investors and business people outside of her field of research – connections that proved instrumental to the development of her seaweed business. For others, interdisciplinary networks led to innovation from ‘a cross-fertilization of ideas’ that created new projects and research directions. Professor Chubb believed that networks were advantageous for his career enhancement and personal growth as an early-career researcher.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Professors Schmidt, Green and Frazer. Moreover, Professors Schmidt and Frazer referred to a ‘multiplier effect’. Networking at conferences, they said, led to further networking post-conference, taking in a wider group of people, ‘visiting contacts who introduce one to other people’, whom they otherwise may not have met. Friendships built from these networks were highly valued for their pivotal

role in providing much needed intellectual support, for which Professor Marshall is forever thankful – ‘they supported me when my field was tiny and controversial’, and Linda Burney felt they were crucial ‘for building a sense of community’.

## Discussion, Debate, Stimulation, Ideas And Innovation

As Foley, Edwards and Schlenker (2014) have previously demonstrated, within the social contexts of conferences, ‘the sharing of knowledge and creative ideas occur and common meanings are developed through the interactions’ (p. 28). It is a sentiment that is reinforced in the stories in this book. Conferences bring different people with different perspectives together to discuss and debate, which leads to the generation of new ideas and innovations. Burney felt that such face-to-face interactions led to conflict resolution and brought about social change; in part, because people’s body language and reactions could be evaluated and responded to. For her, in these environments, people show respect by giving people an opportunity to voice their views.

Sometimes discussions can become heated and controversial, but for Dr Winberg it is important for the emotional aspects of an issue to be aired, as simply reading a scientific article means the information is restricted, factual and disconnected from lived experiences. Indeed, according to Professor Bowtell, open discussions enable culturally sensitive issues to be debated and for the realities of the situation to be made publicly known. In addition, the learning potential is greater because conferences provide an opportunity to get a snapshot of the field as it is at that time and students can ‘get their head around new and complex concepts’ in a meaningful way, as Professor Brian Schmidt asserted. Professor Green notes that conferences play a vital role in getting advice, learning how others are working, and learning about areas other than one’s field.

For Professor Bowtell and Ms Burney conferences provide a focal point that can bring together different groups, many of whom have very different perspectives, and this leads to new ways of tackling problems and challenges. In Professor Calma’s words, at conferences people are talking

about ‘the issues that matter’, which can then lead to ‘thought leadership’. In other words, ‘discoveries are made by the exploitation of serendipitous opportunities by persons already primed to appreciate their significance’ (Ziman 2002, p. 217). These long tail stories help us to appreciate how conferences lead to innovation by fertilising ideas, challenging previous thinking and driving new thinking.

With the knowledge that conferences generate inspiring ideas, Professor Schmidt attends conferences with a list of things he needs to think about, and looks for ideas that can assist him with future research and publications. While conferences stimulate the flow of technology, knowledge, values and ideas across borders, individuals will of course be affected differently and will take away from a conference that which is most important to them.

## Attracting Funding, Trade And Investment

Research funding is highly competitive between individuals, research groups, research centres and universities. However, the stories here demonstrate that conferences can drive access to funding sources and create inducement for funding investment. Professor Green has been successful in securing international research funding, including from industry, by meeting and showcasing work at international conferences, and by using conference contacts to demonstrate collaboration for funding applications.

Dr Winberg has found conferences helpful in generating funding for research and development, and a formalised program of research was initiated as a direct result of conference attendance. Similar to Professor Calma, she has also had success with bringing business interests and researchers from industry together. She has done so by using conferences to test products for new medical applications, and has taken the opportunity to talk to investors and venture capitalists. She firmly believes that the rigour of conferences enables the participant to ‘gain credibility’. For others, such as Professor Marshall, funding arising from conferences has enabled him to continue important medical trials. These opportunities may have arisen also as a result of the positive media generated.

## Influencing Public Perceptions And Policy And Driving Social Change

A common thread through all the stories is the ability of conferences to influence public and media perceptions. According to Professor Marshall, if the “conference gets its media ducks in a row it can gain huge exposure”. He gave the example of conferences in Japan inviting renowned experts to address the Japanese parliament, thereby getting the conference focus right into the heart of the policy-making arena. Similarly, Professor Bowtell stated that international and national policy on the treatment of AIDS was developed in response to conference presentations. Professor Marshall found conferences to be the driving force behind attracting people to participate in his clinical trials – a direct result of media reports which covered the research he presented at conferences. And Professor Tom Calma believes that key drivers behind the social and political shifts that have occurred for Indigenous Australians have arisen from conferences.

## Personal Growth, Knowledge And Learning

Von Hippel (2005, p. 77) said that knowledge must be dispersed to others who can also benefit, for ‘if user innovations are not diffused, multiple users with very similar needs will have to invest to (re)develop very similar innovations, which would be a poor use of resources from the social welfare point of view’. Conferences are very efficient at this task. According to Professor Marshall, conferences provide ‘access to material that’s not going to be published for a year or two ... if you don’t go to a conference at least once every two years you become out of touch and your ideas could be superseded’. It is the ability of conferences to showcase the very latest technologies, instruments and knowledge that makes them superior to other methods of information sharing, enabling attendees to stay ‘one step ahead in their thinking’.

Repeatedly, interviewees spoke of how conferences foster education and enable deeper learning. Attendees have access to works not yet published, learn from others beyond the education sector, and bridge knowledge

gaps. These benefits lead to practical and theoretical outcomes, rapid transmission of solutions, and important changes in an individual's behaviour. Time and again interviewees spoke of the importance of going to conferences at the beginning of one's career, particularly as a young or emerging academic. As Dr Winberg said, 'they [early career academics] can learn more quickly how to contribute constructively and confidently to the conversations as their careers develop'.

The importance of knowledge sharing was highlighted by Professor Schmidt who said that without conferences it would mean that there would be 'a bunch of little people working on things without understanding what everyone else in the world was working on'.

Conferences enable attendees to increase their international credibility and reputation. Dr Winberg pointed out that conferences helped her to 'become internationally recognised as someone with expertise in this field of research'. Hosting conferences can be hard work, but the favourable impression made in the minds of attendees and the increased international standing and awareness of local research make it all worthwhile.

For Professor Calma, conferences were the catalyst for assisting indigenous people to be involved in managing their own education and providing steps to real change. Finally, conferences can assist people to step outside of their comfort zone and address areas that require personal and professional development, allowing them to reach their full potential.