

Why Everything will Change

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It has been said that unless you change ten percent every year, you will have to change hundred percent every ten years. Meetings have been the same for a hundred years, we are heading for a total makeover.

The New Paradigm

Why do we attend meetings? Whenever the question is put to a group of conference participants, the answer is around fifty-fifty 'education' and 'networking'. Learning today means Google and Wikipedia, networking means Facebook, LinkedIn, Xing and a few dozen others. The Internet is challenging our traditional meetings head on.

We all use Google and the fastest growing age group on Facebook is 35+, but to the older generations, these tools are supplements to the traditional methods of learning and building relationships. To Generation Y, the Digital Natives, those who don't know a life without the Internet, learning and networking is a new paradigm.

The biggest generation gap in history

We are facing the biggest generation gap in the history of mankind. Imagine being a teenager during the past decade, having to teach your parents and your teachers, and later your employers, how to do something really important in adult life, how to find information and communicate via the Internet. As a young boy or girl (but mostly boys, unfortunately) you have to teach those that should be teaching you. No wonder GenY is sometimes referred to as the confident generation.

A young student of event management asked me for some advice on her dissertation about the future of events. I suggested a book which would be excellent background information. I can't afford books, she answered, but I could try to find the library.... A while later I asked if she had found the library, no, she said, but she had done some googling and read some summaries and discussions. I put some questions to the author on his blog, she said, and now he has answered and I am interested to hear what you think about his answers. In the time it would take to buy or borrow the book and maybe read the first chapter, she is discussing it with the author!

The GenY's don't learn from books, what a waste of time, they don't learn from teachers, their knowledge is ancient, they don't learn from conference speakers, that is expensive, time consuming, boring and out of date, they find out what they know for themselves, when they need to know it! They are experts at finding and verifying information and they have all the tools they need to do it.

My son as a young student got himself a summer job in a factory. After a few days I asked him if he enjoyed it. Yes, he said, and what I like is that they tell me what to do and then they leave it to me to find out how to do it. I don't know if this company had a poor training programme or a good understanding of how young people learn, probably the former, but it worked.

Think outside the room

I listened to Didier Scaillet, MPI's Director of Business Development, speak on meeting industry trends at World Travel Market in London a short while ago. Think outside the room, was his main message, that is where meetings will grow, in the virtual space. Look at Cisco and SAP organising huge virtual and hybrid meetings, saving millions and increasing attendance by thousands. Have a look at Sam Smith's blog discussing this message from MPI:
<http://interactivemeetingtechnology.com>.

I recently spoke at a hybrid meeting, EventCamp Twin Cities, which happened simultaneously in Minneapolis, Dallas and Basel Switzerland, where I was. I thought at first that it would have been better to be at the main event in Minneapolis, but for time and cost reasons, that was out of the question. But I soon discovered that the Basel 'pod' was better, it was smaller, I met Europeans that I wanted to meet, potentially useful business contacts, and we designed our event just as it suited us, taking part in the main event and interacting with the only community of participants when we were not discussing the the topics face to face in our own group.

Virtual or real?

Please, dear reader, don't tell me that face-to-face meetings are better and will never be replaced by technology. This is not the issue. Of course real meetings are better, they are so good that they shouldn't be contaminated by what could have been done online. Why should you listen to long presentations when you could have read an article or blogpost instead? You meet to meet, not to listen. You need to interact in order to learn and remember, speakers not followed by discussion and interaction are in any case a complete waste of time. And remember, the new generation don't believe in speakers anyway, they prefer to find out things for themselves, they google and discuss with others, online and face-to-face.

The real meeting will always be the pearl, the precious diamond, because time and money and our concern for the environment means that we can only attend a few. The physical meeting must be reserved for what makes the physical meeting unique; the rich and personal discourse and sharing of experiences that has no match in the virtual space. Other meeting content may be shared before and after in online groups, webcasts, webinars and other means of virtual interaction, but future conference participants will not allow their precious personal interaction time to be contaminated by anything that does not uniquely belong in the physical meeting

What to do now

Meetings are already under pressure from demands for greater cost effectiveness and our concern for the environment. Generation Y is still at university, some may just be joining the workforce in junior positions. It will be another 5 - 10 years until they are our mainstream conference goers, demanding something entirely different from what we deliver today.

But it is not as if one generation retires one day and the next walk in the day after. The real challenge is to accommodate two or even three generations at the same time. In the old days, the old were wiser, and the young had to fit in. What we are facing now is upside down, the old need to learn from the young, simply because their way of learning and networking is so much smarter and in line with the digital world around us.

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