

Next-Generation Meetings

The Web 2.0 revolution is changing the way we meet. Here's how to change with it

By Diana Rowe

When was the last time you attended a general session in which the speaker asked you to pull out your mobile device and put it on silent, and then gave you a number or URL for posting your tweets — during the presentation?

That's exactly the session Jeff Hurt organized for a recent National Association of Dental Plans (NADP) meeting. During the NADP event, the multi-tasking speaker was surrounded by three screens, one displaying his PowerPoint presentation and the others filling the screen with live tweets (posts sent via the social networking service Twitter). Many of those tweets came directly from the in-house audience, while others were delivered from a virtual audience unable to attend physically but excited to participate.

"Web 2.0 has turned meetings on their head," says Hurt. "Interactive is the new speaker."

Web 2.0 — it's a revolution in Web design that has turned websites from static monologues of information to vibrant spaces where interaction can take place. Essentially, it signals a shift in our understanding of the relationship between content provider and audience. And websites aren't the only platform affected. Planners, start your 2.0 engines. Social media and Web 2.0 technologies are changing the way we do meetings.

Enabling User-Generated Events

"Attendees are sitting in the driver's seat demanding a say in content," reports Hurt, who is the director of education and events at the Dallas-based NADP, a non-profit, national trade association focused on the dental benefits industry.

Indeed, audience-generated formats are becoming increasingly popular, rather than talking heads and PowerPoint presentations.

Hurt also creates buzz before and after events by adding interviews with speakers for BlogTalkRadio.com, podcasts, blog posts and YouTube videos. These social networking trends are a good thing, he says. Incorporating these applications into meeting planning can enhance events, make them more efficient and improve return on investment.

"Web-based communication won't replace face-to-face meetings," assures Hurt. "These applications provide planners with another low-cost — if not free — way of connecting to all members, not just those in attendance. At times it's almost effortless 'Marketing 101,' as planners only need to start ▶



Photos: Carl Murray

A side screen (not pictured) showed relevant tweets during this discussion at an association conference. Planner Jeff Hurt further lowered the barriers between audience and panelists by removing the onstage table that often separates the two groups.



BarCamp is an international network of conferences, such as this one in Austin, in which participants provide the content.

Photo: Scott Beale, Laughing Squid, laughingsquid.com

► the ‘hype’ and the members take over the discussions. The virtual component is enriching.”

For this year’s annual conference, Hurt is adding online registration through a conference website offering Facebook-style functionality, which allows attendees to create profiles and follow others attending the conference. The trade show aspect is also interactive, as attendees can become “fans” of the exhibitors.

Another example is an event Hurt recently attended virtually via Twitter (by following tweets tagged with a certain word, known as a “hashtag”). The topic was “how to use Web 2.0 tools.” Via Skype, the presenter joined the San Francisco-based live session from Australia, with screens displaying the tweets and the audio and visual of the presenter. The virtual component dramatically increased the ROI, as the session’s impact extended from a live audience into the virtual world.

Power Shifts to the Audience

“The heart of Web 2.0 revolves around ‘you,’” says Corbin Ball, a certified speaker and meeting professional, of Corbin Ball Associates. “User-generated content is transforming the Web from static pages to the participatory web, and this has a trickle-down affect to meetings, resulting in numerous benefits for planners, exhibitors and attendees.”

The most noticeable transformation is the shift in the balance of power from the speakers to the audience, Ball points out. However, another transformation is the popularity of virtual meetings. Ball is quick to note that face-to-face meetings continue to remain vital as a means of education, networking and relationship-building, but that virtual meetings will increasingly play a role.

“Webcasts, Web conferences and advanced video

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Note: To find these sources, type in the name (without the “@” symbol) after twitter.com/. For example, to find Corbin Ball on Twitter, go to twitter.com/corbinball.

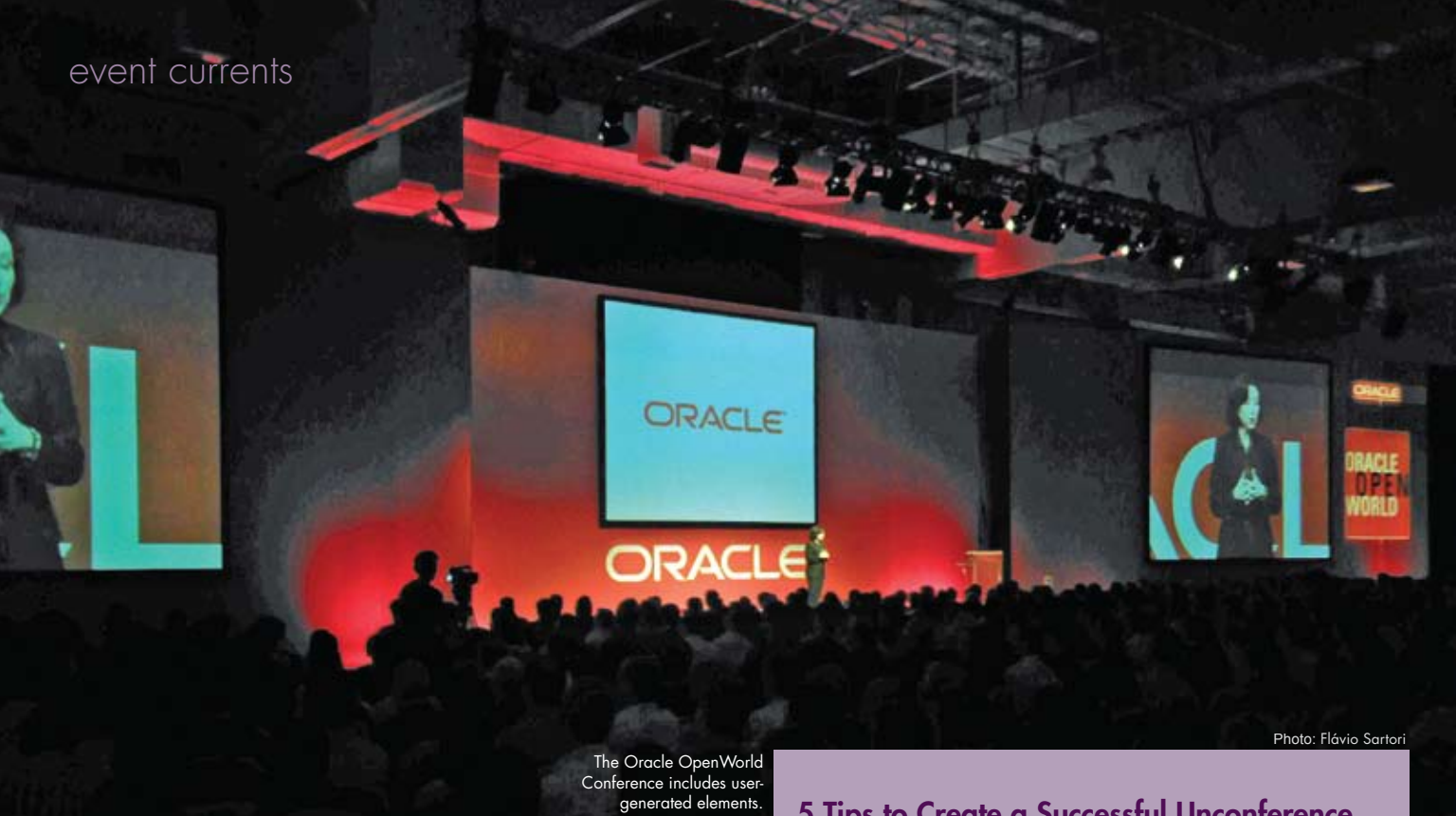
conferencing will serve to connect people at low cost regardless of their physical location,” explains Ball. “These short (30 minutes or less) ‘meetings’ should not be treated as an online version of a face-to-face event. Rather, they will need to be carefully planned, for concise information exchange and training.”

2.0: A Game Changer

“Web 2.0 platforms are indeed totally changing the rules of the game,” says Matthew Fraser, senior research fellow at international business school INSEAD and co-author of “Social E-ruption in Progress: Seven Ways Web 2.0 is Changing the Way We Live, Work and Play.” “These platforms put everybody in the loop.”

That’s what platforms, like collaborative wikis, do, explains Fraser. “They open up dialogue to as many people as possible. Collective intelligence allows everyone to benefit from the organization’s expertise, rather than just a single speaker.”

Fraser cites leading companies like Cisco, which use these Web 2.0 platforms with YouTube functionality, calling these new structures “next-generation workplace experiences.” Large-scale ►



The Oracle OpenWorld Conference includes user-generated elements.

Photo: Flávio Sartori

► companies are now shaving hundreds of millions of dollars from their expenses, thanks to these tools.
 “People will always need face-to-face meetings,” concludes Fraser. “I envision LinkedIn and other social networking becoming an integral part of the service [of the] events industry.”


Planners’ Changing Roles

Julius Solaris feels that the biggest failure of planners is omitting social media from events. “It’s like telling your audience that this part of their life (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.) is not relevant,” says Solaris, head of London-based blur Marketing, a crowd-sourced digital agency specializing in integrating online and off-line.

The planner’s role is evolving from controller to facilitator, explains Solaris. “One of the most common misconceptions is that user-generated events rule planners out of the game. Quite the contrary. Planners are now in charge of creating the atmosphere (meeting) to make the user-created event materialize,” he says.

Joan Eisenstodt, consultant for Eisenstodt Associates LLC, couldn’t agree more. “The social media frenzy is a power that many planners haven’t fully harnessed,” she says. “The virtual world isn’t taking us away from the face-to-face meeting. Humans by nature still need that human connection.”

Planners should look at Web 2.0 as a means for connecting more people and more worlds, as someone always has to process that user-generated information, according to Eisenstodt.

“The face-to-face meeting is the perfect place to connect all those tools, and the planner is the perfect guide,” she says. 

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5 Tips to Create a Successful Unconference

The “unconference” — a facilitated, user-driven conference centered on a common theme — is playing yet another adjunct role in meetings, such as during the Oracle OpenWorld Conference, attended by over 40,000.

After participating in BarCamp communities — BarCamp is an international network of user-generated conferences — Marius Ciortea, senior manager, project management office of Oracle Brand + Creative, took the initiative and created an unconference during the event, procuring an entire wing of the center. Sessions ran the gamut between intense programming to lighter sessions such as “GeekSpeak.”

“OpenWorld brings the group together,” says Ciortea. “The unconference gives community leaders a stage to present their ideas to a group of peers.”

The promotion for the session is left up to the speaker, although Oracle does post a notice on the OpenWorld show floor. Last year’s unconference was amazingly successful, with 75 sessions in four days and total attendance of 1,700, compared to OpenWorld’s 1,600 sessions available.

Ciortea offers five tips to create a successful unconference:

1. Unstructure the unconference. Leave the topics open to the speaker.
2. Have tools at the ready, such as wiki, to capture notes.
3. Create a large and prominent whiteboard with colorful Post-it notes.
4. Location is important. Don’t bury the sessions in an obscure corner.
5. Don’t make them the focus of the entire event. Bill them as bonus sessions.