How to "Web 2.0-Enable" your Live Event
By David Spark, Founder of Spark Media Solutions, LLC
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Producing and attending corporate events, like conferences and trade shows, is not cheap. But people still 'attend in' and 'pay by' the thousands for the unforeseen value to be had in education and new business relations. Over the years, these events develop their own unique reputations:

- Extremely exclusive, big thinkers
  - *– e.g. TED Conference*
- Enormous event, draws tons of eyeballs
  - *– e.g. CES*
- Great networking
  - *– e.g. AlwaysOn Conference*
- Participant driven
  - *– e.g. FooCamp/BarCamp*
- Great product announcements, draws lots of press
  - *– e.g. DEMO Conference**

Whatever reputation develops from your event, everyone can benefit from layering social tools (some call it Web 2.0 technology) to enhance the connectedness and interactivity among all interested parties. Event-based social media is in line with the goals of attendees and event producers: *to improve physical logistics, distribute information, connect people, and enhance face-to-face conversations.*

If you're producing an event, begin by asking yourself what services, often free, can I take advantage of to extend the event's social value for those people attending, those who can't attend, and everyone who wants to look back after the fact. You should look towards

Web 2.0 tools, those that behave like socialized desktop applications, to be the catalyst to spread the knowledge and enhanced interaction among all interested parties, whether they're physically present or not. An event's information and conversation can be distributed via a variety of means: bulletin boards, photos, video sharing, recorded discussions, news reports, live wikis, quick updates, opinions of event goers, Q&A, group chat, reminders, recommendations, how-to advice, maps, and directions to the next event.

Historically, social networks and like-minded Web 2.0 tools empower users to keep in touch with the thousands of people they've collected in their contact database. Without applications like social networks, blogs, micro-blogs, photo sharing, podcasts, video blogs, and of course email it would be impossible for anyone to stay in touch with so many people.

When you meet someone at an event, follow through takes effort, a lot of effort. The communication drop-off rate following a conference is huge. You start with good intentions, trade business cards with the promise of following up. But if you don't make a note of your meeting and send a message immediately after the conference, the moment is long forgotten. Luckily, Web 2.0 tools offer platforms for attendees and producers to take advantage of communications before, during, and after an event. The following is some advice for producers on how to extend the functionality of a live event by socializing a content network with Web 2.0 tools and enabling conversation around it.

First Steps

Free Wi-Fi

In the San Francisco Bay Area, having an open wireless connection at a conference is almost as expected as flush toilets. All attendees, not just the press, want to write about and record the event live while they're in the room. By providing free wireless connectivity that can handle the load of multiple connections, you're enabling the conversation to happen for everyone.

If you're at a hotel that's going to charge you an arm and a leg for a wireless connection, look for a sponsor and in return provide a splash page for everyone to see when they log on. If you can't pull off free Wi-Fi, you simply can't "Web 2.0-enable" your live event. This is a must.

Put one person in charge

If you've produced a live event before, you know it takes a lot of work. Adding a digital social layer will require some work as well. Hire one person to take the reigns to "Web 2.0-enable" your live event. That person needs to corral all the sites, set up user accounts, initiate discussions, and inform attendees beforehand, during, and after the conference of the services you're making available for all to share.

Rally around passion

Look at the most popular bloggers and you'll see there's one characteristic that's true to all— they're passionate. Passion and eagerness can't be faked nor can these qualities be dictated. People are drawn to passionate people, they trust them, and their enthusiasm rubs off on others providing a reason for them to participate as well.

The person you put in charge to initiate the Web 2.0-enabling of your live event should have that self-starting no-direction-needed attitude. Look

at all levels within and outside your organization for that person. Besides having a do-it-yourself capability, your social media director should be affable, a good writer, a connector, and extremely hard working as this job requires continuous non-stop work.

Give people a reason to participate

Hand a child a box of crayons and some blank pieces of paper, and even with all that prodding they'll still look up at you and ask, "What should I draw a picture of?"

The same goes for event participants and Web 2.0 features. Even when we're outfitted with all the tools for content creation and conversation, many of us still look to others for that kind of guidance. Unless a community member takes charge, you'll rarely get much response in your online environment if you just set up a discussion group and then walk away. Remember, the event is the discussion. Your job is to be the catalyst, to find those stories, issues, or nerves you can touch off to spark debate. Web 2.0-enabling your live event isn't about the mechanics of setting up discussion areas, but it's also about your creativity of engaging others in conversation and finding the topics that attendees are eager to delve into deeper.

That annoying "What is Web 2.0?" debate

I've become weary of the hard-to-avoid debate of "What is Web 2.0?" You can't mention the term Web 2.0 in passing without someone saying, "What is it?" And then someone else will usually chime in with "You know there's Web 3.0 now." One way people try to show that they're "in the know" is to force the "What is Web 2.0" debate at the moment the "2" is uttered or state their opinion by wearing a t-shirt that says "Web 2.0 is _____." I'm just asking everyone to please stop. I've become exhausted.

First Steps (cont'd)

Lead them, and then let the community take control

In an ideal environment, your community will have members that will rise to the top as leading voices providing those catalysts for others to rally around, argue with, or even hate (don't dismiss the value of a threat as you build and strengthen a community). If you don't already have an audience, expect "the rise of voices" to take some time. You'll need to lead them first.

Back in 2000, I started a discussion group called SFComedy on Yahoo! Groups (then named eGroups), a bulletin board for comedians in the San Francisco Bay Area to discuss performing, upcoming shows, and bookings. I used to be a stand up comedian myself. When I first started the site, still a comedian, I verbally had to harass a handful of my comedian friends to get on the site and start posting. I would make posts every now and then to draw people into discussions, and after the first year I wrote up a silly SFComedy Awards where I presented prizes to different members of the board. Today, seven and a half years later, I am no longer a comedian, but I'm still the moderator of the SFComedy board. I barely pay attention to what's going on, but it's taken on a life of its own with many SFComedy "voices" rising. Currently, there are 1100 members posting somewhere between 500-1000 posts every month. While I can take credit for starting the board, I can't take credit for the current activity. The community has taken control and I'm thrilled.

Production Framework

Make your blog or Web site the epicenter for all event updates

While you'll most definitely have an event Web site, I'd also recommend a blog as the de facto home base for links to all the online social elements you're enabling at the event, plus a place for your staff to post updates before, during, and after the event. The advantage of having a blog is it's easy to maintain and you can set up multiple authors to act as contributors.

If you do not already have a blog, set one up for your company or the conference. I strongly recommend WordPress (www.wordpress.com). It's very simple, free to use, and has the largest developer network, so if there's any additional functionality you want, such as a slide show or podcasting, someone has created a free plug-in that you can just download and install.

I don't recommend creating a temporary blog just for the event. Once the event is over, the blog will appear barren given the lack of posts, and those dated postings will drop lower in search rankings and you won't get any spill over traffic from future blog postings. If it's a yearly program, then the blog/Web site can be used throughout the year as a source for information for news, small meet up events, social networks, discussion groups, etc. The goal is to give the site legs beyond the actual dates of the event.

Production Framework (cont'd)

Collect community blogs and Web 2.0 account information

Tracking, promoting, and getting buy in on all these Web 2.0 tools will be a lot easier if you make it part of the event sign up process. When attendees sign up, let them know that you're enabling a variety of Web 2.0 tools for the event. Once you show them what you're doing, ask them to provide their blog address and account names for the various Web 2.0 applications you'll be using (e.g. Flickr, Jaiku, Facebook, etc.) at the event.

Don't do this casually. People place a lot of value on their personal information. Show the value exchange by presenting your information first. Provide links to the various event accounts with valuable content already in place. If it's impossible to pre-load with content (e.g. videos, photos, podcasts, blog content), give attendees another incentive to provide their personal account information. For example, for those attendees who fill out the form completely offer a $10 discount on admission or a free gift at the event.

Give existing content creators special treatment

Now that you have attendees' blog addresses and accounts on YouTube and Flickr you can approach these user generating content producers about participating in the event. Identify the top producers and offer them prime placement on the event's community sites, blogs, email announcements, etc. They'll appreciate the fact you recognized them as a leading industry voice and see the value of your targeted audience. Chances are they'll take you up on your offer and be a contributor.

Choose one tag name and stick to it

While the variety of Web 2.0 services you'll be using for your event will have different configurations and behave in a variety of different ways, finding information across these media entities can be simplified by using a singular tag name. Choosing a singular tag name and publicizing it at the event with signage, messaging, and announcements is the best way to connect all the content people will be creating across all the enabled Web 2.0 services.

Choose an unusual tag name. Something like BlogConferenceSF2007, which includes the event's date, might work. You'll need to pick a name with no spaces as many Web 2.0 applications don't accept spaces in tag names. It's not a bad idea to use that name also as your username with all the various services.

Also, when you or anyone else is blogging about the event, ask them to mention this tag name in the title of any blog post. Having one tag name for all accounts, blog entries, and posted media will make it easy for you and others to search and find all content related to the event.

Go with popular apps

While there may be a specific photo application you like personally, or an odd social network that's your favorite, keep it to yourself. Your goal is to get as many people to join and participate. In many cases, you'll have to stay with the most popular tools that people are already using. Unless the new tool is really going to solve a problem that none of the others can, go with the Web 2.0 applications most users will already have accounts with, such as Facebook, Twitter, Jaiku, and Flickr.

Production Options

Make audio and video of the sessions available to everyone

If you're recording the presenters at your event, it's an extremely easy move to take the sound and video files and make them available for download and streaming on your blog.

For audio files, trim them, and then upload them to an audio files directory and use this free tool (http://www.macloo.com/examples/audio_player/) to create an audio player for streaming audio on your blog. It's the same tool I use to stream audio on my podcast/blog, the Spark Minute (www.sparkminute.com). In addition, create a podcast feed for all these audio files so those who want to capture everything at the event can simply subscribe to the feed. For WordPress users, I highly recommend the podcasting plug-in, PodPress (www.mightyseek.com/podpress/).

For video files, use the video sharing site Fora.TV (www.fora.tv). This site is dedicated to talking-head videos and they appear to have no length limitations. If you have eight one-hour sessions, you could upload all to Fora.TV. Fora.TV, like most video sharing sites such as YouTube, makes it possible for you to embed the hosted video on your Web site or blog.

Record live video of conversations, not just conference sessions

The cost of streaming live video from your event has dropped to zero. There are tons of live video streaming services for you to choose from, such as Ustream.tv (www.ustream.tv), BlogTV.com (www.blogtv.com), Operator11 (www.operator11.com), Mogulus.com (www.mogulus.com), Stickam (www.stickam.com), and Justin.tv (www.justin.tv). All of these tools make it possible for anyone with a Web cam and a microphone to record a live event. It's as simple as setting up an account and pressing the record button. Your job is to create something interesting to record.

Have one person with their notebook and Web cam sit in the lobby or networking area and call attendees over to have a chat live on camera. Pick a question that will reveal something personal about their experience at the event. For example, "Who's the most interesting person you've met here so far?" or "What's the coolest thing you've seen at the event?" People will be excited to share what they're discovering at the conference. Many of these tools let you also save recordings which could be edited and posted later. A great post-conference blog post could be "Best lobby interviews."

Lobbycon

There are two types of people who go to corporate events. The dry sponges that want to soak up all the information sitting through every single conference session. And then there are the people who think they'll see something new, but they're pretty savvy about the industry anyway and don't expect to get any great value out of the conference sessions. Instead, they see the greatest value from just networking. These people have taken on the role of a new kind of attendee, the lobbyconner. Lobbyconners "attend" conferences by just hanging out in the lobby. Their style of attendance doesn't require them to sign up and actually pay for the event, yet they still achieve their conference-going goals by just pressing flesh with attendees. For those of us who live in San Francisco and are deluged by endless conferences, a lobbycon mentality can save thousands in attendance fees.

Production Options (cont'd)

Micro-blog to keep all attendees "in the know"

Micro-blogging is the act of sharing brief text messages among members within a social network. Sent and received through any Internet-connected device such as a PC or a mobile phone, these short (less than 200 character) messages provide insight into what fellow participants are thinking, doing, or going to do. Individually, they are often useless, but in the aggregate micro-blogging provides a running dialogue as to what's going on in the community. Combined with other social behavior, micro-blogging can be quite valuable because it gives you a short history of your colleagues' lives. These headline-driven status updates allow individuals to easily touch base with multiple people and know what they're thinking and doing.

Transform that same type of communication to a live event, where a huge group of people, many of whom don't know each other, have the opportunity to shout out desires, great finds, and other announcements during the event. Like-minded people can find each other quickly and everyone who stays connected can always be "in the know." For micro-blogging to be effective, remind attendees to sign up, post to, and track the event's micro-blogging channel. Offer them suggestions of what they can post to the channel. For example, use the micro-blogging channel to let everyone know:

- About something cool you just saw.
- That there's a raffle drawing happening in five minutes.
- You're looking for someone interested in a given subject.
- There's been a room change.
- There's an after party at a certain bar.
- You just posted some photos or a blog post (include link).

The top competitors in this field are Jaiku (www.jaiku.com) and Twitter (www.twitter.com). Twitter is more popular, and to create up a specific event channel use Twitter User Group (www.twitterusergroup.com). Jaiku also allows you to create an event-specific channel and may soon be bigger as they were bought by Google. Soon you'll probably be able to sign up with your Google account.

If your conference is rather large you can set up a different microblogging channel for various tracks. Micro-blogging is the easiest tool for event announcements and empowers everyone to keep fellow attendees up to date as to what's going on at the event.

Production Options (cont'd)

Video blog (vlog) daily show reports

Update everyone, attendees and non-attendees, as to what's happening at the event by recording short reports (ideally less than three minutes) from the show floor. This is different from live interviews because you'll actually write, shoot, and produce a show report. It can be a very simple shot of a talking head into a Web cam. Two free Web-based options I like are Springdoo (www.springdoo.com) and TokBox (www.tokbox.com). Both allow you to quickly record short videos via your Web cam, which are hosted on their sites, but you can embed those videos on your blog or Web site.

The advantage of these Web-based alternatives is you don't need to save a file, encode it, and then upload it to a video sharing network like YouTube (www.youtube.com). The disadvantage is you won't get a video sharing network's casual viewing traffic. If you're hoping to get that kind of traffic, expend the extra effort of going through the extra steps of saving a video file, encoding it, and then uploading it. Also, when filling out the description page make sure to label the video appropriately, choose a representative thumbnail image, and add in descriptive keywords including the tag name you've chosen for your event.

If you want to create really impressive looking reports that look like a newscast, invest $400 and purchase Adobe Visual Communicator 3, a software package that allows you to create professional-looking news reports with over the shoulder graphics, lower thirds, and full screen video effects. There's no need to do any editing. All the cuts and graphic effects happen live. AVC3 takes a little training, some producing, and copy writing, but the end result can be extremely impressive. If you have the right person on camera, he or she will look like a real news reporter covering a live event.

The event really happens if you and others take photos

Many people will bring their digital cameras to the event. Inevitably they'll take pictures, post them, and want others to see their photos. Offer them a place to post the photos. I'd recommend Flickr (www.flickr.com) because it's the most popular social photo sharing site, it's owned by Yahoo! (if you have a Yahoo! account you have a Flickr account), and you can tag photos with keywords like BlogConferenceSF2007.

Let everyone know that you'll be using Flickr to post photos using the tag name you settled on for your event. Encourage everyone to do the same. If everyone uses the same photo sharing site (e.g. Flickr) with your chosen tag name, a single search on that name, BlogConferenceSF2007, will display all the photos from the event even if people are posting from different accounts.

Don't forget to take photos of the evening parties. Those are usually the ones everyone wants to see.

Names, names, and names

In local news, the philosophy of selling newspapers is names, names, and more names. That's because in small communities people want to see and read about themselves and their friends. A small conference (I'm not talking about CES here) can operate under the same philosophy. Interview and take photos of as many different people as possible. Make sure to get the correct spelling of everyone's name and their companies. It takes a little extra effort but it's really worth it when you and your colleagues want to remember people you met at the conference. Plus, people will forward information printed about themselves to other people, which will definitely help with traffic. In addition, people will search on names which will also help.

Production Options (cont'd)

Enable live chat so attendees can talk to each other during the conference sessions

People at the conference and not at the conference love to chat about what they like and don't like about the speakers at the session. Everyone wants to throw in their two cents and sadly the five minutes left for questioning at the end of the session is not enough time to get all your questions asked and answered. Many attendees relegate their online chats to instant messaging (IM). Offer an alternative. Instead of IM, place a live chat on your Web site or blog. If you're really bold, open up the conversation for everyone to see by projecting the live chat on the wall next to the speaker as he or she is talking.

This is highly recommended as it allows for more content during speaker sessions. And if the session gets dull the moderator can always turn to the chat session to find audience questions. But you should never run into that problem if you've read my article, "More Schmooze, Less Snooze: How to Deliver 'The Most Talked About' Conference Session" (www.sparkmediasolutions.com/conference.html).

As a warning, when you make chats public, you'll need a moderator to pre-approve chat messages before they go live. There are many applications that will allow you to post chat to your Web site. Possible tools are Coffee Cup Live Chat (www.coffeecup.com/live-chat/), Geesee (www.geesee.com), and here's an endless list of more options (www.freebielist.com/chat.htm).

Promote

Build interest by setting up groups on social networks

If many of your attendees are already on a social network like my favorite, Facebook (www.facebook.com) you can create a group to promote the event. People can post photos, videos, and messages to a bulletin board, but don't rely on them in lieu of other photo, video, and messaging sites. Social network's tools are often not as powerful as the other tools mentioned in this article. Plus your audience for posted content is limited to those people already on the social network. Social networks are useful to build interest, but don't rely on them as your only social tool.

The greatest attraction to your event are the attendees

While you'll inevitably send out an email blast to your existing mailing list, you'll also want to take advantage of invite tools like Evite (www.evite.com) and Socializr (www.socializr.com) which let people know who is coming to the event. The invitation tool through Facebook works even better by sending out personal news flashes such as, "Five of your friends are attending this event." With that kind of marketing it's not your event that's attracting people to attend, it's their own circle of friends and industry influencers that's drawing them in.

Promote (cont'd)

Remind attendees about your Web 2.0 tools

While you're at the event, constantly make public announcements to remind attendees verbally and with signage of all the tools you've integrated into the event: the blog, the photos on Flickr, the Jaiku channel, the tag keyword they should all use for any posted content, the live video lobby chats, the daily video reports, and social network groups. All of that information can be found on your event Web site and/or blog.

What Next?

Follow up with Spark Media Solutions

Do you have other, innovative ideas about Web 2.0-enabling a live event? What do you think works the best, and what should people not waste their time on? I welcome your feedback and dialogue on the topic.

If you have an event coming up in which you'd like some help producing the social media component, contact me at david@sparkmediasolutions.com.

Special thanks to Amy Johns, Mike McAllen, Philip Faulconer for their input, editing, and advice on this piece.

* DISCLOSURE: I'm an analyst with the Guidewire Group, the company that co-produces the DEMO Conference.

Checklist - Web 2.0-enable your live event

Production elements

- ☐ Event Web site
- ☐ Event invitations to build interest and draw attendees
- ☐ Blog
- ☐ Micro-blogging
- ☐ Photo sharing
- ☐ Live video interviews
- ☐ Daily video show reports
- ☐ Audio and video of sessions
- ☐ Live chat during sessions
- ☐ Social networking for bulletin board discussions

Set up accounts

- ☐ Free Wi-Fi (sponsor?)
- ☐ Blog (set up multiple user accounts)
- ☐ Photo sharing (Flickr)
- ☐ Live video (Ustream.tv, BlogTV.com, Operator11, Mogulus.com, Stickam, Justin.tv)
- ☐ Micro-blogging (Jaiku, Twitter)
- ☐ Video blogging tool (Springdoo, TokBox, Adobe Visual Communicator 3, YouTube and/ or other video sharing site)
- ☐ Audio player and/or podcasting set up
- ☐ Video sharing site to post full sessions (Fora. TV)
- ☐ Live chat tool (Coffee Cup Live Chat, Geesee, and more)
- ☐ Social networking (Facebook)
- ☐ Invitations (Evite, Socializr, Facebook)

Staffing

- ☐ Social media chairperson (passionate, affable, a good writer, a connector, an online leader, and extremely hard working)
- ☐ On camera interviewer for quick ongoing live video interviews
- ☐ Video blog reporter for show updates
- ☐ Blogger(s) to report on live event
- ☐ Audio and video editor to edit, encode, and post sessions

Beginning conversation

- ☐ Reasons to participate (topics and debate issues)
- ☐ Collect blogs and user accounts of attendees (show available content or provide incentive)
- ☐ Give top content creators prime placement on blog and/or event Web site

Content development

- ☐ Before the event (pre-load information if possible)
- ☐ Pick one tag name to use across all applications and promote it
- ☐ Photograph people (especially at evening parties) and write down their name and company
- ☐ Use names as much as possible in blog posts, photos, and videos
- ☐ Tag everything with the event's tag name