

Scaling Back Big Events - A RedMonk Note

Prepared by Michael Coté (cote@redmonk.com) | Summer 2009

Overview

Everyone knows that "these tough economic times" are driving events organizers to scale back events, companies to sponsor less events, and travel budget cut-backs for both individuals and companies. Still, the marketing and developer relations that technical events help drive must go on. What is the landscape and what are some RedMonk recommendations? This RedMonk Note - a brief, informal write-up of RedMonk's thoughts - addresses these questions.

The Landscape

Canceled events, travel budget cuts

Starting with Novell's Brainshare in the Fall of 2008, vendors of all sizes have been scaling back or even canceling their events. The large, enterprise software vendor SAP has [canceled the European instance of its Sapphire conference](#) and cut back on parts of its SAP TechEd developer-centric event. Adobe has [canceled its 2009 MAX event in Europe](#). Indeed, pulling back the focus to North America only is a common occurrence.

In addition to end-user focused events, many vendors have cut back events for "ancillary" parties, such as analysts. For example, Sun Microsystems canceled its annual 2009 analyst event, while Microsoft cut the analyst track from its TechEd user conference.

This handful of examples reflect the overall reduction in scope of large events.

More than just saving money for themselves, event organizers are responding to reduced travel budgets for attendees. [A recent National Business Travel Association survey](#) provides an example data point of this industry-wide trend:

Eighty-four percent of 119 travel buyer respondents reported travel budget cuts since October 2008, and 36 percent said expenditures decreased more than 15 percent.

For many conference attendees, travel is both professionally and personally rewarding:

- Professionally, it offers attendees the chance to meet with peers, learn about new technologies, influence vendors, and otherwise broaden their horizon.
- Personally, for those attendees who are not frequent travelers, going to events offers a sort of "working vacation."

As such, travel budget cuts are not necessarily welcome by employees who may see such cuts as a reduction in award-like compensation for their labor.

Responding

Mini-events, unconferences, non-vendor events, virtual events

While "big time" events may be suffering, RedMonk has noticed a steady-state in smaller, regional events and unconferences.

Mini-events

These "mini-events" bring the event to regional hubs rather than requiring attendees to travel to one place. For example, while SAP has canceled Sapphire EU and Community Day during TechEd US, SAP is running several "[mini-Sapphires](#)" and [developer-centric events](#) instead. The logic here is to address budget cut-backs on both sides.

These "mini-events" are regional in nature and visit cities where there are large user populations or that are easy to get to travel hubs. They tend to be one day in length and composed of several presentations with a meal provided and opportunity for Q&A. Key to acting as a replacement for large events is to encourage "HallywayCon," that is having attendees and event organizers hang out and in an unstructured way, outside of talks.

The risk of canceling long established events are exposure to snarky commentary and missed opportunities for the overall community to have the one, large face-to-face meeting of the year. Still, a good defence is to be truthful about not only the need for the vendor to save money, but the requests of customers to help save travel money.

Unconferences and barcamps

Unconferences are also maintaining their strength as an alternative to large, traditional conferences. Unconferences typically meet several characteristics:

- Free to attend
- Run by volunteers
- Cheap to run, often paid for by several \$500 and \$1,000 sponsorships levels
- Agenda is driven by attendees
- No "expo" or booths, maybe tables and sponsored - but short - talks

Events suffixed with the word "camp" are the most popular type of unconferences, for example, with events like [CloudCamp](#), [iPhoneDevCamp](#), [RedMonk's Adobe/SAP Nano-conference](#), [OWASP](#), or [BarCampAustin](#). There is no official group, per say, that authorizes or runs these unconferences. Rather, in an idealistic Web 2.0 way, a group of people comes together and decided on a date and place and then puts together the event.

Attendance at these events varies from 10-20 people to (low) thousands, depending on the event. The payoff for attendees is a higher quality of content and peers, costing them just the time they spend there.

For attendees, there are draw-backs and risks, however:

- There are fewer chances for training as found at larger conferences.

- Vendors tend not to make large announcements or detail vendor specific products; indeed, too much "vendor speak" is often frowned upon in favor of more general, non-vendor specific discussions.
- The quality of speakers may be high (or terrible), but their profiles tend to be less grandiose than keynoters at big conferences.
- Unconferences tend to be scheduled in the evenings or weekends, stealing personal time from attendees.
- Typically, attendees do travel little or no travel to attend unconferences, they go to ones hosted where they live, cutting back drastically on travel expenses.
- Finally, put simply, the unconference may not have useful information for all attendees.

For vendors and others who're looking towards unconferences as a substitute or supplement for big conferences, there are many rewards:

1. Cost should be drastically lower. Even if vendors get involved in the time-consuming process of helping organize an unconference, the overhead tends to be much less because of volunteers, low cost of facilities, and smaller number of people.
2. While there is a drastically smaller number of attendees, the quality of each attendee has a better chance of being higher. Counter-intuitively, because unconferences tend to be free (and in their city), the people who attend tend to really want to be there rather than taking a "work-vacation" to a big conference.
3. Attendees are encouraged to be more engaged, even giving their own talks and presentations. While overly-sales focused discussions are frowned upon, this gives anyone - vendor or individual - the chance to have open, frank discussions about their interests.

Also for vendors, participation and sponsorship in unconferences builds goodwill with the respective communities. Sponsorships sometimes come with variations on the traditional "speaking slot" as well. For example, sponsors of some CloudCamp events are given small speaking slots during "Lightening Round" presentations.

Small and Medium Sized Conferences

In addition to unconferences, several individuals and online communities have recently been organizing small to medium sized conferences. Rather than being vendor-centric, these conferences tend to give a technology-centric community the chance to meet face-to-face and exchange information. Examples here are [QCon](#), [The Java Posse Roundup](#), [Ignite Salt Lake](#), [NoSQL East](#), [Open Source Bridge conference](#), [Monospace](#), and other free and non-free unconference-like events. Response to these conferences tends to be positive, but is largely dependent on attendees making the event a success rather than the organizers.

Virtual Conferences

Virtual conferences are seeing much experimentation in response to big event and travel cut-backs. These events typically consist of one to multi-day planned agendas where participants stay at home and attended webinars, teleconferences, and virtual worlds like SecondLife.

Reaction is extremely mixed to these events, but conference organizers seem determined to make them work. Key to recent events RedMonk has attended is providing a forum for the virtual attendees to have a back-channel (a virtual HallwayCon) such as Twitter.

Recent examples are the [IBM Virtual Global SOA Forum](#), [CloudSlam](#), [SAP Education Virtual Learning Symposium](#), and a handful of virtual analyst events.

Risks

As with any venture, there are risks for vendors and others when it comes to unconferences and other non-traditional conference formats. Primarily, losing control of the agenda. This can be the whole point, and benefit, for attendees, but can conflict with traditional conference goals.

Others risks mirror those for attendees:

- Low turn-out resulting in a smaller impact than required.
- Being shut-out as "too vendory" and ignored, resulting in wasted time and effort.
- Inability to get speaking slots.

In comparison to the low cost of participating and the potential for higher-quality attendees, these risks seem manageable.

Measuring Success

Traditional or no, any event organizer will want to measure the success of the event or their involvement in it. The usual metrics such as attendee can still be useful, but additional metrics are needed since the numbers will be lower.

Soft Costing

One (non-traditional) conference organizing expert, [Sara Dornsife](#), pointed out three traditional reasons companies typically get involved in conferences:

- Brand awareness with target audiences
- Technology adoption
- Lead capture

These new conference formats, she points out, excel at the first two but are typically not as good at lead generation as traditional, large conference. For measuring the cost of the other two, Sara suggests calculating the cost per attendee, for example, as she roughs out:

CloudCamp sponsorship is \$1,000 - 75 captive, voluntary, enthusiastic participants. So brand awareness = \$13.33/ea, whereas an event like OSCon can cost upwards of about \$80,000 (no lie) for about 3500 participants (far less captive of an audience), which is \$22.85/ea for brand awareness. It's pretty poor math, but works.

"Hits"

Tracking social media and web mentions during and after the event is another measurement tool. Many events assign themselves a hashtag, for example, in Twitter and then encourage the attendees to use this hashtag. Tracking "hits" this way can be a bit of a fire hose but will

give you a sense and a event-per-event line to measure against. In this case as well, you can use "poor math" that "works" to track cost per hit.

Participation in non-traditional conferences can generate traditional media hits as well. Mark Hinkle, Vice President of Community at Zenoss, Inc, attributed a recent cover story on Zenoss due to their intimate involvement in recent unconferences.

Community

While it can't be measured, the degree of face-to-face interaction that unconferences provides is key, as Mark notes:

Regardless of how much email, video conferencing, and other technology permeates our work lives at the end of the day there is no substitution for personal interaction and I think that's the underlying benefit of attending unconferences because it's a place to collaborate and have interactive discussions rather than time-shifted ones in email.

Regional events, mini-conferences, and unconferences excel at driving conversations between the vendor or (more commonly) the subject matter at hand and members of that community at a lower price than large, traditional conferences.

About RedMonk

RedMonk (www.redmonk.com) is not your parents' [industry analyst](#) firm. When we founded the firm in 2002, we knew that we wanted to do things differently. In our opinion, the industry analysis business was fast becoming a mere [protection racket](#). While rackets are undoubtedly a profitable business arrangement, they're neither sustainable nor ethical in our view.

It should therefore come as no surprise that we've always been different. Over the past few years, however, we've pushed the envelope even further. After seeing the benefits of open source first hand via our coverage of firms in the space, we made the decision to embrace it for our own business – a decision that we've never had cause to regret. As a result, all of our content is open and freely accessible, available at <http://www.RedMonk.com>.

Our business model is straightforward; we do occasional project work but mainly work under yearly retained subscriptions with [clients](#) which include consulting hours, press services, and [a variety of other value adds](#). One important note: we do no commissioned research of any kind, feeling that it has little value.

Our revenue is primarily derived from vendors, although the occasional savvy enterprise/university/government agency does slip through the door. And while we do work with some of the biggest firms in the business, we also have quite a few startups on board.

While it's impossible given the breadth to simply distill our coverage and views, the core thesis that guides much of our work is that technology adoption is increasingly a bottom up proposition. The supporting evidence abounds; think Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP, Firefox, or Eclipse. All of these are successful because they've built from the ground floor, often in grassroots fashion.

So the question we pose to you is this: you may have analysts that help you understand top down. Who do you have that does bottom up?

About the Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial-NoDerivs License.

To view a copy of this license, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

or send a letter to

Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.