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oneonone

Robert B. Tucker

The author of seven books on innovation, he's a frequent speaker on the global conference circuit – which has given him the opportunity to observe firsthand the 'transformative changes' the meetings industry is experiencing. He recently convened a two-day think tank for a small group of executives who produce conferences to help them chart their own path – in other words, to innovate – in a shifting landscape.

By Susan Sarfati, CAE

So she's wondering: "Where did my audience go? We are getting satisfactory evaluations. When we ask the attendees what [they] think of our conferences, the response is, 'It was good; it was nice.'"

So why is she losing attendees?

Because other conferences have apparently siphoned her participants off. There's some solid customer-service research out of Harvard pointing out that 75 percent of people who leave a business (or conference) never to return again were "satisfied." They weren't mad. They weren't disappointed. They just weren't engaged. And some other conference producer dangled another conference and they jumped ship.

So what's the solution?

The only solution to this situation is to innovate. To change the way she and her team of conference producers think about creating value in an increasingly competitive space. Satisfactory evaluations are not giving her insights into her attrition problem. So she needs to get closer to her population's unarticulated needs and expectations, and develop new metrics of attendee ROI and engagement. This was a big topic at the retreat.

Okay, let's say a conference planner's key conference is losing steam. What should he or she do?

One option would be to just copy the TED format. After all, TED conferences are hotter than hot right now, and imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But from a practical standpoint, what they do a poor job of is [providing] the latest tools, strategies, and insights that busy professionals can actually apply to their work once the conference is over. In other words, they don't really "take on the customer's problem" in any significant way, because that would require knowing the audience's pain points. It would require the conference producer recruiting speakers who could address those needs. So what I'm saying is, build on your strengths. Don't try to mimic someone else's model.

What did the Elite Retreat's participants want to spend the most time discussing?

We spent the most time wrestling with the issue of how you innovate to create a more powerful experience overall, and a more compelling educational experience in particular. In this over-communicated world, how do you gain people's attention

and inspire their future loyalty? The overarching response to these issues is the need to begin with the end in mind. There is a compelling need for conference producers to redefine their role and see themselves not solely as meeting planners, but as orchestrators, or architects, of conferences. The planner role is so linear, left-brain, so reductionist. If you define yourself as a meeting planner only, then it's all about execution, checking things off your to-do list.

But what if that's your title and what's expected of you?

Even if that's part of your job description, what the Elite Retreat really brought out was that if you are in the meetings role in your organization, you can empower yourself to enlarge your scope and view yourself in a larger context. If you begin to see yourself as conference architect, then innovative thinking is central to everything you do. And every decision you make. You're really an artist, and you're creating more compelling experiences.

The conference industry is the experience economy and the social-networking economy personified. People come to meetings from different ages, stages, places, and hopes, most of which are hidden from us. So conference orchestrators need to meet a very diverse set of needs, especially the nonlinear, human component. We were fortunate to have the seven-time Emmy-winning composer Gary Malkin join our discussion [at the retreat]. Gary was kind enough to not only perform for us on opening night, but talk to us about music's role in creating what he calls "multisensory" experiences, as he did for [TED curator] Chris Anderson, at a recent TED conference in Beijing. Gary's lifework is about the dire need to rejoin heart and head, logic and intuition.

You say that everyone who has taken a shower has had an idea, but the innovator is someone who dries off and goes on to implement the idea. You point to the "knowing" and "doing" gap. Why is this so wide?

We all know we need to do these things to become indispensable, but somehow we don't do what we know we need to do. The details drag us down to fighting fires and continuing longtime routines. What the Elite Retreat really highlighted is the need to nurture the visionary component of meetings and not allow ourselves to get beaten down.

After putting on [my own] small conference, I am in awe of what planners do! They must put

'In this over-communicated world, how do you gain people's attention and inspire their future loyalty?'



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‘The conference industry is the experience economy and the social-networking economy personified.’

together a whole new team of people for each meeting — keynote speakers, breakout speakers, the hotel and production staffs, and other outsourced personnel. They contend with thousands of moving parts, and in distant cities. All of which activate the execution part of the brain instead of the part that needs to be exercised, nurtured, and supported.

And what part is that, exactly?

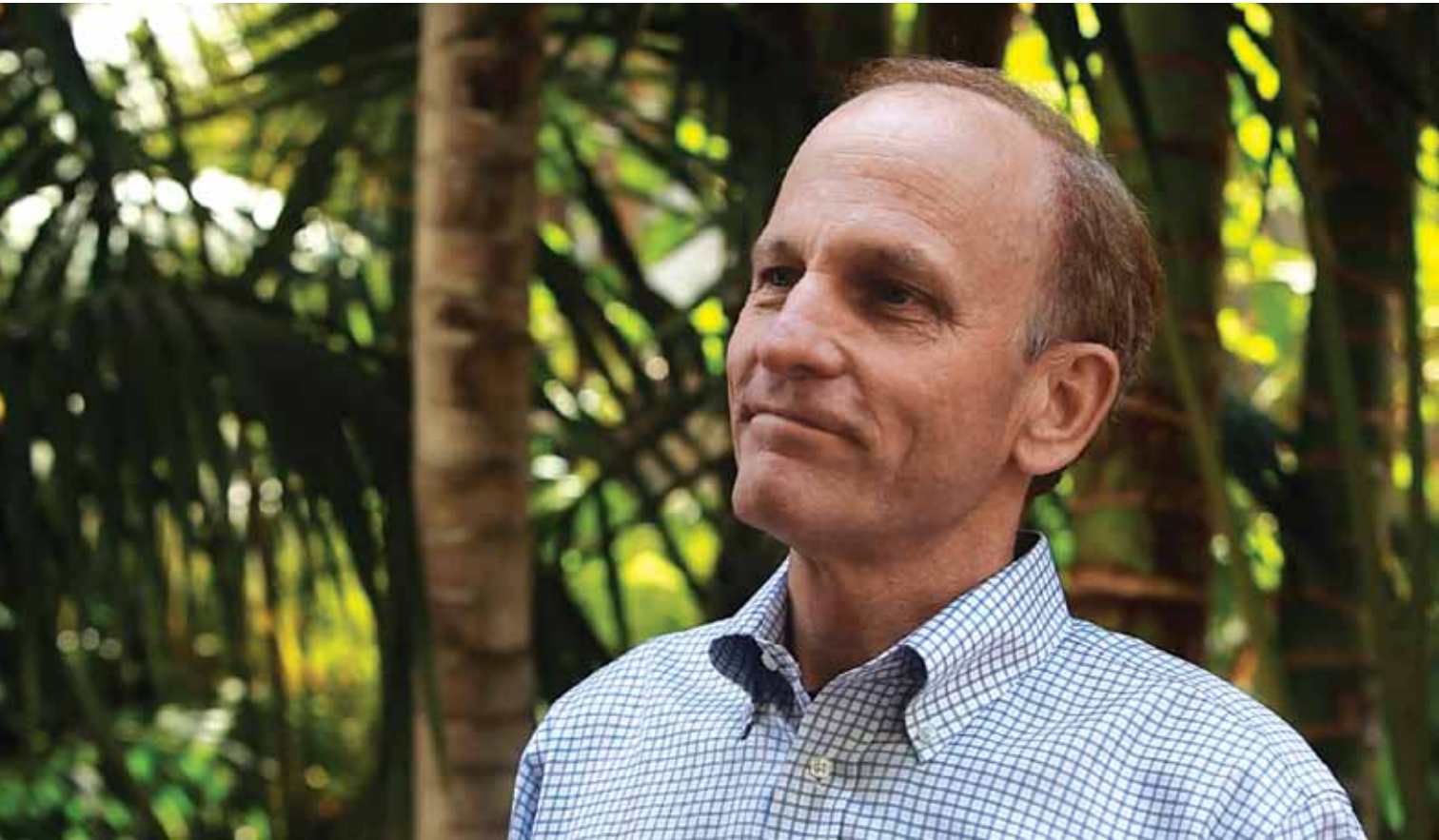
The founder, chairman, and co-chief executive of Panera Bread, Ronald M. Shaich, said recently in a *New York Times* interview that in all organizations there is a *delivery* muscle and a *discovery* muscle. He went on to suggest that most organizations focus way too much on the delivery muscle and give the discovery muscle short shrift. The discovery muscle in the meetings industry is about how attendees’ needs are changing and if they’re really being fed on an emotional level. The mega-question is: How engaged are participants at your conference and what can you do to turbo-charge engagement and become indispensable to people? This is a new frontier.

So, are you saying that people come to conferences because they instinctively know they need to exercise their discovery muscle and they see your conference as a way of solving that problem?

Exactly. The difficult global economy, the ramp-up in complexity, the amount of change in society, the explosion of technology, the sheer amount of information — all these forces and factors are like a fire hose coming at people every minute. These forces are literally rewiring our brains as we try to cope. But whether we feel exhilarated or exhausted, in control or out of control, is a function of how we integrate it all and make sense of it around the campfire! And that’s what a good conference does: It puts you into an immersive experience with other human beings on their journeys, and it lifts you up and renews your faith in the future.

How do we avoid burnout and live up to this potential?

On a practical level, I encourage meeting producers to actually write out a conference vision statement — [to] go off to their brainstorming space and write out the vision statement. Then measure — quietly and secretly — everything else people suggest that is not in sync with the vision, [such as,] “We can cut that out, we can put some filler in here, and we can cheapen that.” Measure input



Insight to Spare Robert Tucker asked each participant to share some of their ‘keepers’ – a sentence or quote that provides a reminder of a bigger idea – from the Elite Retreat. Among them: ‘Overenthusiasm for change creates resistance to change.’

against your vision before making any decisions.

Every decision that meeting producers make, every element, every component of conferences [should] be approached from the standpoint of how it can be better for the guests.

Could you be more specific?

No detail is too small. For example, most conferences have someone who serves as an emcee. That’s an area for innovation right there. If the emcee is disconnected from your vision and goals for the meeting, they can destroy the culture and the deliverables pretty quickly. So if you put on your conference-visionary hat, you’ll search to find the right emcee and inculcate the emcee into the vision.

Receptions are a typical part of every conference. But how can you innovate the reception, knowing that people often attend because of the

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› For more on the Elite Retreat, visit innovationresource.com/2012-elite-retreat.

› To watch YouTube highlights from the Elite Retreat, visit convn.org/elite-retreat.

networking? Instead of looking at staff as hands to implement, intimately involve them in value creation. The orchestration role becomes pivotal and will result in a more innovative conference.

Another conference-architect requirement is to be an industry expert who anticipates hot topics in advance. Great conference producers share the vision and objectives with their speakers. And they have a finger on the pulse of their people. ■

Susan Sarfati, CAE, is CEO of High Performance Strategies LLC (sarfatihighperformance.com), which focuses on organizational assessments, innovative thinking in organizational strategy, leadership and management, moving from ideas to execution, and building a human-focused learning culture. She served as CEO of The Greater Washington Society of Association Executives. She can be reached at susan@ssarfati.com.



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