Important design considerations for program crowdsourcing

BEFORE INCORPORATING appropriate program crowdsourcing into your event you have some important decisions to make concerning *scheduling*, *time*, and *space*.

Scheduling considerations for crowdsourced sessions

Meeting programs can be entirely or partially crowdsourced. (An example of the former are the peer conferences described in my book *Conferences That Work*.) One of the first program design decisions you need to make is how much of your program time to reserve for crowdsourced sessions.

For an existing event, one way to approach this decision is to take a hard look at the traditional sessions you've included in the past and be honest about whether they were and still are genuinely needed or were scheduled out of habit.

For example, scheduling a keynote speaker to open and/or close your conference may be an unconsciously routine act, ignoring whether a chosen speaker really adds core value to your event. If your program committee is asking *"who can we ask to keynote this year?"* rather than saying *"there are two issues we really need to address this year and we know that presenters X & Y are the people to get,"* this is a strong indication you are scheduling your conference out of habit instead of focusing on creating the best possible program for attendees.

An example: the annual edACCESS conference[13] has now been held continuously for over a quarter of a century. The four-day program is usually 100 percent crowdsourced at the start of the meeting. Occasionally the organizers decide there is a clear and strong need for a specific external keynoter who has value to share that is not available from attendees. Keynotes at edACCESS are a carefully thought out exception rather than an automatic default.

While designing your program, *avoid the classic and common mistake of assigning crowdsourced sessions to a conference track.* Instead, make your crowdsourced sessions *plenaries* or *simultaneous breakouts.* You'll find more details in the accompanying sidebar.

Time considerations for crowdsourced sessions

When designing the meeting format for an event with crowdsourced sessions, you'll need to decide:

- How much time to allocate to crowdsourced sessions
- The duration of crowdsourced session time slots
- How many crowdsourced session time slots to schedule
- The maximum number of simultaneous crowdsourced sessions to hold in each time slot

All of this should be decided in advance. Although it's possible to change your design at the event because of discoveries made during opening crowdsourcing, in my experience it's unlikely to happen. In the more than twenty-five years I've facilitated crowdsourced conferences this has only occurred once. (At that event, a topic was uncovered that everyone wanted to learn about, along with an appropriate expert, so we replaced a crowdsourced session time slot with a single presentation and discussion.)

How do you determine answers to the above design issues before the event? There's no simple "right" answer, but the following information will help.

How much time to allocate to crowdsourced sessions

For a conference that predominantly consists of crowdsourced sessions

For a predominantly crowdsourced sessions conference, as described in *Conferences That Work*, first reserve time for opening sessions (*The Three Questions* and crowdsourced session selection and sign-up), closing sessions (personal introspective and group spective), any fixed sessions that you want or need, and refreshment/meal breaks and socials. All remaining available conference time can then be allocated to crowdsourcing topics and the crowdsourced sessions themselves.

When holding crowdsourced sessions for the first time

If you're introducing crowdsourced sessions to an existing conference you may want to begin with a minimal approach. Start by allocating dedicated time for initial crowdsourcing of topics and facilitators. *Post It! For Programs* (Chapter 22) is the fastest method to do this, and can be run in fifteen to thirty minutes during a break, meal, or social. You can also use *The Three Questions* (Chapter 18) or *Peer Session Selection and Sign-Up* (Chapter 21) for more comprehensive program crowdsourcing.

For after crowdsourcing, while attendees are busy elsewhere, reserve sufficient time and a place for your small content-expert group to review the requests and offers and generate a program of

crowdsourced sessions. Finally, allocate one or more dedicated time slots, together with an appropriate number of breakout locations, for the selected crowdsourced sessions.

Adjusting the time allocated to crowdsourced sessions for future events

Crowdsourced sessions are almost always popular with attendees and receive strong positive evaluations. Review your event feedback and consider increasing the number of session time slots dedicated to crowdsourced sessions at future events. If your time together is limited, you can also increase the number of simultaneous sessions held in each time slot to give attendees more choices.

The duration of crowdsourced session time slots

While there's no one duration that's optimal for every topic and group composition, I've found that 60 minute time slots work best for the widest variety of situations. Be sure to schedule breaks between the crowdsourced sessions time slots.

How many crowdsourced session time slots to schedule

I recommend you schedule as many crowdsourced session time slots as possible, bearing in mind the traditional fixed portions of your event. If you have multiple time slots, batch two or three of them as a morning and/or afternoon of crowdsourced sessions, and distribute the batches throughout the conference.

The maximum number of simultaneous crowdsourced sessions to hold in each time slot

First, a tip. Determine the number of simultaneous breakout spaces you'll need *before* contracting space for your meeting!

We rarely know how many people will show up for conference sessions, regardless of whether they were scheduled six months in advance or a few hours beforehand. (Exceptions are corporate must-attend events and expected-to-be-popular sessions that have sign-up and/or fee requirements.) So your goal should be to make the best estimates you can and not worry unduly if, as will invariably happen, some sessions are over- or under-subscribed.

After all, a session for the only three people at an event who are passionate about a specific topic may be one of the most rewarding sessions for them!

The best crowdsourced sessions are small and focused around a topic or issue that can be profitably covered or explored during the duration of the session. Hour-long sessions with twenty or fewer people work well, but if your conference has hundreds of people you may have to settle for larger sessions.

The following table contains suggestions for session sizes and the number of simultaneous sessions to offer.

FIGURE 15.1 • Suggestions for the sizes of sessions and the number of simultaneous sessions to offer

EVENT TOTAL ATTENDANCE	SESSION ATTENDEES	SIMULTANEOUS SESSIONS
20–60	10–15	3–4
60–100	15–20	4–5
100–200	20–30	5–10
200–400	20–35	10–15
400–600	20–50	10–20

Space considerations for crowdsourced sessions

Ideally, each crowdsourced session should be held in a separate room. These rooms should be close to each other and to the main conference rooms. When sessions can all be held physically close to each other, breaks between sessions may be made a little shorter if desired, and participants are more likely to congregate and continue conversations in the vicinity.

Chairs for participants plus a flip chart or two satisfy the needs of most crowdsourced sessions. Determine the resources available in each room and decide if you want to provide additional support for the sessions, such as flip charts and markers, projection, and (for larger rooms) audio reinforcement.

If you have fewer rooms than the number of simultaneous sessions you plan to hold, carefully consider whether running more than one session in the same room will work. In my experience, the most common problem with running multiple sessions in the same room is sound bleeding between groups, which proves distracting for all. In general, try to avoid running multiple sessions in the same room unless it's large, the expected sessions are small in size, and the session groups will be widely separated.

More information on physical space considerations for crowdsourced sessions can be found in Chapters 12–14 of *The Power of Participation*.

Read Chapter 24!

Finally, be sure to read Chapter 24 *Preparing for and running crowdsourced programs*, which contains important information you'll need to know to successfully implement many of the following techniques.

The biggest program crowdsourcing mistake you can make

Sometimes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

> CONFERENCE ORGANIZER: *"Hey, Adrian, we're incorporating crowdsourced sessions into our conference this year!"*
>
> ADRIAN: *"That's great! What are you going to do?"*
>
> CONFERENCE ORGANIZER: *"Well, some program committee members are skeptical that this format will work, so we're going to add a crowdsourced sessions track that people can attend if they're interested."*
>
> ADRIAN: *Nooooooo! Don't do that!*

I've had more than one conversation like this. Here's why adding a crowdsourced sessions track to a conventional conference program is a big mistake. Consider these three points:

- To date, relatively few people have experienced a crowdsourced session;
- Lecture-style formats comprise the vast majority of people's formal learning experiences, so anyone who hasn't previously experienced a crowdsourced session will probably be skeptical that it'll be useful; and
- We are creatures of habit, and most of us are cautious about trying something new.

The unfortunate outcome is that, if given the choice between a traditional conference format and trying something new, *very few people will attend a crowdsourced sessions track*. Most attendees will stick to the conventional and "safe" concurrent sessions on pre-announced topics.

I was a skeptic myself when I started using crowdsourced sessions back in 1992. A number of years passed before I stopped worrying whether this newfangled way of running events would work for other groups. It turns out that when crowdsourced sessions are the only conference activities going on, people dive in and nearly everyone likes what occurs. But when you give people a choice between what's familiar and what's not, all but the bravest take the safer path.

I've made the crowdsourced sessions track mistake. I've stood in a room set for three hundred attendees and had thirty show up, while four other concurrent sessions siphoned off 1,400 people. Even though those thirty participants had an amazing time, the perception from the vast majority who didn't attend (and the conference organizers) was that crowdsourced sessions were "not really wanted" and could be safely ignored.

So how do we avoid making this mistake? *Make crowdsourced sessions plenaries or simultaneous breakouts.* You certainly don't have to make crowdsourced sessions 100% of your conference, but when they're scheduled there should be no other type of conference activity going on.

There will probably always be conference organizers who are skeptical that crowdsourced sessions can work. A compromise may appear to be the way to keep such people happy, but it will invariably create a self-fulfilling prophecy; the "experimental" track will be poorly attended and the skeptics will say, "I told you so."

We all get tripped up from time to time by the unintended consequences of our good intentions. When planning to add crowdsourced sessions to your next event, resist the alluring compromise of a crowdsourced sessions track. Instead, dedicate a few hours, a half-day, full day, or multiple days to crowdsourced sessions. Then you'll see just how well these formats work.