



Breaking the attention deficit habit Keeping attendees engaged

We often have buzz words in the events industry. That makes us no different to many others. I know I certainly don't want to hear the word 'pivot' for quite some time!

Engagement is a word that seems to be on the tip of everyone's tongues of late. And so it should be. Across the globe we've been locked down, kept apart, distanced and seen the basic need of human connection drift on past us. As our beautiful world re-opens and we realise what we've been missing, the need to be engaged and re-connect is at the top of our 'to do' lists.

As event organisers, it's our job to provide the pathways to engage, connect, learn and elicit emotional reactions at our events. The challenge we're facing... for the last two or so years, we've all learnt how to multitask while attending an event, seminar, conference, product launch, team building etc etc in the virtual environment.

Just because we're back to meeting in person, doesn't mean that disappears. In keeping our attendees engaged, we perhaps need to break it down.

What does 'engaged' actually mean?

Our ever faithful Oxford dictionary defines engaged as "busy doing something; involved with somebody/something in an active and interested way"

For me, therein lies the challenge - ...in an active and interested way! I'm not sure about you, but what keeps me active and interested isn't necessarily the same as my peers, colleagues or even my family. I wonder if our solution lies in the first part of this definition - ... busy doing something; involved with somebody.

As we feverishly manage the slightly alarming influx of requests to meet again, perhaps now is the time to re-think our programs, schedules, itineraries and run orders to create opportunities for engagement (the business of doing something, being involved with somebody).

But how???

Great question and I admit I'm still going through the trial and error phase, which I don't think is a bad thing (stay tuned for my article on our higher than normal fear of failing).



There's a couple of ways you can approach this.

Define what engagement means to your audience

So much harder than it sounds. The quick and easy answer is to survey your audience. But, as we know from our own lives, we receive far too many surveys. Perhaps approach this one a little differently. If you have the time to be a little flexible, consider incorporating a question or two into your registration that helps you define engagement for your attendees.

Example 1: For educational programs:

Question:	How do you like to learn?
Answer choices:	I like to listen and observe
	I enjoy small group discussions
	I want to be hands on and involved
	I prefer to learn visually

You can design the answers around the capability you have to introduce different delivery types into your program. These are just a few examples.

Other questions you can incorporate, depending on your event and audience include:

- What is your main reason for attending
 - We ask this in our post event surveys but by bringing it forward it will help you understand what a successful outcome looks like for your attendees. Some answer options could include:
 - To connect with my peers
 - To have fun
 - To make sales
 - To find a new job
 - To feel valued and appreciated
 - To visit a new city
 - To learn
 - To find research partnerships



- How long is too long?
 - Ask your attendees how long they think each session or activity should run for. Not everyone wants to sit and listen or interact in a team building activity, or tour with their colleagues for two or more hours.
 - By understanding their limits you can create experiences that align for their attention span keeping them engaged for durations designed for them.
- What would a meaningful connection look like for you?
 - We assume a lot and that's usually because we don't have time to delve deeper. If time allows, try to find out what a meaningful connection looks like for your attendees.
- What creates meaning for you?
 - If you can identify what's important to your attendees on a personal level, you can build activities into your program that provide opportunities to meet this. As with all the questions, you'll want to tailor your answers to what can be delivered. For this one think of things like:
 - Opportunities to contribute to doing good for others
 - Playing with dogs
 - Helping those who are disadvantaged at the moment
 - Looking after the environment

If you build it...

Once you understand the reason your attendees are coming, how they like to learn, engage and where their attention span is sitting, you can build around it. Things to consider as you build:

- Reduce the length of sessions and activities
 - If you can't reduce them, consider adding short 15 minute breaks. This could be to do a movement activity or to give attendees time to talk and connect
- Introduce silent activities into your sessions
 - How many of us have watches that let us know when we've been still or sitting for too long? Our attendees are no different. When their watch tells them to get moving, give them something to do.
 - Set a long bar table at the back of the room and have them pack amenity kits for domestic abuse shelters (read my article on social sustainability 12 Sept for tips on this)
 - Put play dough or lego stations around the room
 - Have a puzzle station



- We're used to being able to move freely, give them this during your event to minimise the chances of losing them
- Partner with other bodies to introduce activity breaks
 - Meditation Australia is a great example
 - Vision Australia or Guide Dogs Australia (or the equivalent in your state or country) usually need busy places as part of the guide dog training. Give them a call and see if they can bring some dogs in during a break for a puppy petting zone. They can actively fund raise while they're there - who wouldn't pay \$5 or more for time to cuddle a pooch?
 - Look at non-competitive gamification in your sessions or in the exhibition area. Not everyone likes to compete and activities where attendees co-create or co-design creates engagement and connection in a different way.
- Indoors v outdoors
 - We've all seen the impact of sitting indoors too long. It can drive you a little stir crazy. If your program allows, think about ways to incorporate outdoor activities, venues or even a 10 min power walk around a block with the speaker leading the charge into the day.
- Sessions that move
 - Try the speed dating format for session delivery. All it takes is one largish room and a couple of speakers willing to have fun. Each speaker delivers a 20 min presentation with the audience getting up and moving to the next presentation zone.
- Create a place to connect
 - This can vary so much depending on your audience. It could be a meet the experts zone, first timers playground or a pop up store (I'll be talking more about this concept in an upcoming article).
 - By giving your attendees not only the time (do you dare to increase break times!) but the places and spaces in which to connect, you increase their levels of engagement.

I honestly could write so much on this subject as I admit I am your target audience. I switch off quickly if I'm not kept engaged and I spend a fair bit of time considering ways I'd keep me engaged.

Feel free to reach out if you have any queries or want to chat more. Hope you've enjoyed this week's article.

Paula